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Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

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Note by the President of the General Assembly

1. On 8 July 2002, as a result of the open-ended informal consultations of the plenary on revitalization of the General Assembly conducted during my Presidency, the General Assembly adopted a landmark resolution, resolution 56/509, whereby it decided that the President, the Vice-Presidents and the Chairmen of the Main Committees would be elected at least three months before the opening of a regular session. The Assembly also decided that, for the fifty-seventh session only, the President, the Vice-Presidents and the Chairmen of the Main Committees would be elected as early as possible.

2. Pursuant to resolution 56/509, the General Assembly elected the President of the General Assembly for the fifty-seventh session on 8 July 2002 and the Vice-Presidents and the Chairmen of the Main Committees for the fifty-seventh session on 17 July 2002.

3. This change will have far-reaching implications for the work, not only of the General Assembly, but of the entire United Nations system. It does not merely represent a procedural modification, but constitutes a major step towards strengthening the General Assembly by enabling smooth transitions between the successive Presidencies and thus encouraging the President and other officers to play their role in a much more efficient manner.

4. The annex to my note presents principal elements that have been discussed at the meetings of the open-ended informal consultations of the plenary on revitalization of the General Assembly during the period from May to June 2002. I hope that this evolving document, which is a contribution to the continuous revitalization process, will be enriched by new ideas and proposals in parallel with the implementation of the agreed reform measures.

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Annex

Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

I. Context

1. Many Member States consider that the work of revitalizing the General Assembly that led, inter alia, to the adoption of resolution 55/285 under the presidency of Mr. Harri Holkeri should be continued.

2. The work of the General Assembly and the committees should be better organized so as to permit the Assembly to concentrate entirely on its core tasks, which are:

(a) To debate and take action in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations on international political, economic, social and legal questions and to consider and debate on reports from the Economic and Social Council, the Secretary-General and the Security Council;

(b) To negotiate and approve international conventions;

(c) To discuss and adopt the budget.

II. Suggested reform measures

3. The following suggested measures constitute part of an ongoing process aimed at the revitalization of the General Assembly.

A. Role of the President of the General Assembly

4. The President of the General Assembly should meet regularly with, in particular, the Chairmen of each of the Main Committees, representatives of major groups and/or chairpersons of regional groups (on questions involving procedure) and with a representative of the Secretary-General so that conferences, regular and special sessions of the General Assembly and summit follow-ups can be better planned.

5. The President of the General Assembly should also meet regularly with the Presidents of the Security Council and of the Economic and Social Council and with the Secretary-General to discuss and/or share ideas on questions regarding the continuous revitalization process of the work of the Organization.

6. The President should endeavour to be in New York on a more or less permanent basis during the session. The President should establish informal relations with his/her prospective successor to ensure a smooth transition from one session to another and also develop a comprehensive approach of handing over his/her responsibilities, including suggestions for further improvement in the work of the General Assembly. To facilitate this, the President of each session of the General Assembly, as well as the Chairman of each of the Main Committees and the Vice-Presidents of the General Assembly, should be elected at least three months

before the opening of that session.[a] They should meet before the opening of the next session to discuss organizational matters.

7. The Secretariat should prepare the necessary documentation and all relevant information for the incoming President so that he/she will be fully prepared to assume his/her new functions. Adequate support in the form, for example, of one or two United Nations professionals from existing staff should be available to the Office of the President. These professionals need to be assigned to the Office of the President for an extended period of, at least, three years initially.

8. The President could give clearly identified responsibilities to Vice-Presidents.

B. Role of the General Committee

9. The President could convene the General Committee on a regular basis and have informal meetings in order to propose the necessary modifications to the agenda. Member States represented on the General Committee should designate focal points to enhance the efficiency of the General Committee.

10. The outgoing General Committee should be in close contact with the prospective members of the incoming General Committee so as to work informally on the agenda of the next session.

C. Organization of the debates

11. In organizing the debates, the main goal must be to allow time for discussions on important issues and recent developments in international relations.

12. Efforts should be continued to reduce and group items by subject on the agenda and/or by taking them up on a biennial or triennial basis.

13. On periodic items, efforts could be made to eliminate most routine speeches (representatives could simply inform the Secretariat that their position is consistent with that of past years).

14. For debates on "urgent" items of concern to most Members, speeches delivered during the session should take into consideration, insofar as possible, responses and comments on proposals made by other speakers during their presentations.

15. To promote interactive debates, when speakers (representatives of major groups or of their own country) have delivered their major statements, Member States could voice their opinion to add to his/her speech, or to comment on presentations made by other groups or countries, in order to contribute, whenever appropriate, to a more interactive debate. The latter short additional statements could be delivered in the plenary from the seat of the delegation concerned.

16. In addition, whenever the President of the General Assembly feels it to be appropriate, he/she could organize informal meetings or round tables to study thoroughly matters of topical interest.

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[a] To this effect, rules 30, 31 and 99 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly have been amended (resolution 56/509 of 8 July 2002).

D. Guidelines on the conduct of work

17. The President of the General Assembly and the Chairmen of the Main Committees are encouraged to use the rules of procedure in a comprehensive manner to promote the effective and constructive conduct of all aspects of the work of the General Assembly.

18. At the beginning of each session, the President of the General Assembly, as well as the Chairmen of each of the Main Committees, should remind the Members of these rules of procedure and encourage the Members to cooperate fully in achieving the goals of the Committees.

E. Reports and role of the Secretariat

19. Reports should be concise, operational and analytical. With the exception of financial reports, the General Assembly should always set a limit to the number of pages requested for each report within the framework of the 16-page rule set, inter alia, by its resolution A/53/208. Reports should conclude with recommendations for action to be taken by the General Assembly in order to facilitate the eventual drafting of Assembly resolutions/declarations. The Assembly should avoid asking for too many reports from the Secretariat (avoid duplications). In many cases, the Assembly could request oral reports instead of written reports. A list of the requested reports could be established, with a view to rationalizing how the reports are prepared.

20. During the three months before the beginning of the session, the President of the General Assembly should review the list of the reports requested by the General Assembly for its next session with the incoming President and the Secretary-General, with a view to ensuring that they will be made available for the Member States in time.

21. The President of the General Assembly should encourage the Secretariat to propose improvements that could facilitate the work of the General Assembly in accordance with rule 47 of the rules of procedure of the General Assembly.

F. Budgetary procedure

22. Permanent Representatives are encouraged to be more involved in the budgetary process. Work on the budget could be better planned. The Committee for Programme and Coordination and the medium-term plan should be better organized to produce a strategic approach.

G. Modern technologies

23. The General Assembly should be encouraged to make increased use of modern technology, including for the counting of votes during elections or the drawing of lots.

24. Contributions from delegations on national experience in modernizing the counting of votes, particularly in parliaments, would be welcome.

25. In the meantime, Member States and the Secretariat should increase the number of assessors.

Appendix

"Rule 35

"In addition to exercising the powers conferred upon him elsewhere by these rules, the President shall declare the opening and closing of each plenary meeting of the session, direct the discussions in plenary meeting, ensure observance of these rules, accord the right to speak, put questions and announce decisions. He shall rule on points of order and, subject to these rules, shall have complete control of the proceedings at any meeting and over the maintenance of order thereat. The President may, in the course of the discussion of an item, propose to the General Assembly the limitation of the time to be allowed to speakers, the limitation of the number of times each representative may speak, the closure of the list of speakers or the closure of the debate. He may also propose the suspension or the adjournment of the meeting or the adjournment of the debate on the item under discussion."

"Rule 68

"No representative may address the General Assembly without having previously obtained the permission of the President. The President shall call upon speakers in the order in which they signify their desire to speak. The President may call a speaker to order if his remarks are not relevant to the subject under discussion."

"Rule 72

"The General Assembly may limit the time to be allowed to each speaker and the number of times each representative may speak on any question. Before a decision is taken, two representatives may speak in favour of, and two against, a proposal to set such limits. When the debate is limited and a representative exceeds his allotted time, the President shall call him to order without delay."

"Rule 73

"During the course of a debate, the President may announce the list of speakers and, with the consent of the General Assembly, declare the list closed. He may, however, accord the right of reply to any member if a speech delivered after he has declared the list closed makes this desirable."

"Rule 109

"No representative may address the committee without having previously obtained the permission of the Chairman. The Chairman shall call upon speakers in the order in which they signify their desire to speak. The Chairman may call a speaker to order if his remarks are not relevant to the subject under discussion."

"Rule 113

"During the discussion of any matter, a representative may rise to a point of order, and the point of order shall be immediately decided by the Chairman in accordance with the rules of procedure. A representative may appeal against the ruling of the Chairman. The appeal shall be immediately put to the vote, and the Chairman's ruling shall stand unless overruled by a majority of the members present and voting. A representative rising to a point of order may not speak on the substance of the matter under discussion."

"Rule 114

"The committee may limit the time to be allowed to each speaker and the number of times each representative may speak on any question. Before a decision is taken, two representatives may speak in favour of, and two against, a proposal to set such limits. When the debate is limited and a representative exceeds his allotted time, the Chairman shall call him to order without delay."

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After recalling the rules of procedure above, the President of the General Assembly and each of the Chairmen of the Main Committees should also remind delegations, at the beginning of each session, of the following guidelines to facilitate courteous and respectful debate:

- The need for a stricter adherence to punctuality and for limiting the duration of speeches in all General Assembly meetings, including informal meetings.
- The intention of the Chairman of a Main Committee to invite a Permanent Representative, in the event of protracted delay in action on proposals by a member of the delegation concerned, to personally present his/her point of view.
- The Fifth and the Sixth Committees have established their own procedures for reaching decisions. Consensus must be encouraged by the Chairmen of the four other Main Committees. However, consensus does not mean unanimity. In the event of disagreement, a decision needs to be sought by means of a vote in accordance with the rules of procedure.